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SUBJECT: SIX PEOPLE KILLED IN VIOLENCE IN RURAL WEST BENGAL

REF: 06 CALCUTTA 00578

1. (SBU) Summary: In the evening and early morning of January 6-7, six people were killed in fighting around the West Bengal sub-district of Nandigram. The violence occurred between local villagers opposing the state government's plans to develop a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the area and members of the state-ruling Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM). Tensions had been high since January 3 when locals, with the backing of small Leftist parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI) and CPI (Maoist-Leninist), attacked police and government officials in the belief that the officials were surveying land in preparation for future development. The villagers established road blocks and damaged bridges to prevent access to the area. Police and paramilitary forces moved in over the following two days but failed to prevent numerous CPM agitators from gathering in neighboring villages and in mounting an armed attack on Sonachura village Saturday evening, January 6. According to reports, fighting with small arms, homemade bombs, swords and knives went on through the night resulting in deaths and numerous injuries. Newspapers printed photographs of dogs feeding on charred corpses and described the area as being like a "war zone," with limbs and bodies strewn about. In response, opposition parties Trinamul Congress (Trinamul) and the Congress Party (Congress) announced general strikes or "bandhs" for Monday January 8, which disrupted business activity and some transportation. This violence follows fighting and demonstrations in December 2006 over the GOWB's plans to develop a TATA car factory in Singur district, another rural area not far from Calcutta, and reflects the serious problem facing the state government as it tries to implement its industrial policy over the objections of some rural communities and political opposition. End Summary.

2. (SBU) In the evening of Saturday January 6, violence exploded in the rural West Bengal sub-district of Nandigram, located 150 kilometers southwest of Calcutta. CPM cadre clashed with local villagers supported by small leftist groups such as the CPI, Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), CPI-ML, Muslim group Jamat-ul-Ulema-Hind as well as a local village organization Krishi Jami Raksha (Save the Farmland Committee). CPM activists gathered in villages in Nandigram throughout Saturday to mount a response to earlier attacks by the Nandigram residents against police, government officials and local CPM leaders on Wednesday, January 3. The villagers had been upset

about the prospect of their land being acquired by the CPM-controlled GOWB as part of a 250-acre SEZ for the Indonesian corporation Salim Group. In addition to attacking visiting government officials, the Nandigram villagers set the local CPM office on fire, destroyed bridges and blockaded roads. Police and paramilitary forces were deployed on January 3 and were patrolling Nandigram over the following days. CPM Central Committee Member Benoy Konar told the media prior to the CPM attack on Sonachura village that, "We [CPM] will surround Nandigram with our men and give them hell." Law enforcement was noticeably absent when the CPM made its assault on Sonachura village over a four hour period with homemade bombs, small arms, swords and knives. Six villagers were killed, many others injured or missing. Media compared Sonachura to a battlefield strewn with bodies, dismembered limbs and the injured. The "Hindustan Times" newspaper printed a photograph of dogs feeding on a charred corpse. The police's failure to intervene was attributed to not wanting to confront their political masters, the CPM party functionaries.

13. (SBU) Opposition Trinamul and Congress parties were quick to exploit the violence and to call for a general strike, or "bandh" in West Bengal. Trinamul called for a 12-hour bandh and Congress a 24-hour bandh on Monday, January 8. Many offices in Calcutta and throughout the state were closed and transportation was disrupted. Trinamul and Congress supporters enforced the strike with some violence. Two people were injured in Calcutta's neighbor city of Howrah, when a bomb was thrown at a bus. Four police were injured in Nandigram, when they were stoned by locals and trains were disrupted in the northern town of Asansol, when train tracks were damaged. Police arrested 350 bandh enforcers and demonstrators in Calcutta. ConGen discussed the recent violence with Calcutta Police Commissioner Prasun Mukherjee, who believed that the disruptions and possible violence would likely continue for the near future. Mukherjee

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was also concerned that Nandigram could become a communal problem as many of the villagers were Muslim and Muslim groups like Jamat-ul-Ulema-Hind were using the recent violence to create the fear within the local Muslim community that the SEZ land acquisition was an anti-Muslim effort and not simply an issue of industrial development.

14. (SBU) The Nandigram incident follows earlier violence and opposition agitation in December against GOWB land acquisition for a TATA Motors car factory in Singur district (REFTEL). Trinamul Leader Mamata Banerjee had conducted a 25-day hunger strike to galvanize opposition to the TATA factory. After Banerjee ended her hunger strike on December 28, hopes were high among the general public and the business community that the strikes and violence which ended 2006 would not mar the start of 2007. However, the latest round of opposition to the planned SEZ in Nandigram and resultant fighting has already cast a pall over the new year. During the bandh, ConGen met visiting HSBC Bank Head of Global Resourcing Rob Murth after Murth's meeting with Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Murth said he told the CM Bhattacharjee that the bandhs in West Bengal will force HSBC to review its plans for future investment in the state. HSBC already has one back office processing operation (BPO) employing over 2,000 people and has signed an agreement to construct a second office for another 3,000 people.

15. (SBU) Comment: This latest outbreak of violence in Nandigram and the opposition parties' bandh is undermining the GOWB and CM Bhattacharjee's efforts to portray West Bengal as having overcome its history of destructive politics. 2007 is not offering a new chapter for the state but rather a return to an old story of strike and political violence. However, it would be wrong to see this clash as a problem limited to West Bengal. The fundamental cause of the violence is the persistent tension over implementing a program of industrial development in rural areas where land is seen as the lifeblood of the people. This tension is not unique to West Bengal. Throughout India, with its massive population and limited land, government officials confront communities reluctant to part with their

properties and farms. Corporate and government leaders' plans for economic development will go awry if they do not effectively communicate with the poor rural masses and respond to their fears. Rather than an isolated incident, Nandigram represents a general concern regarding the full implications of India's aspirations for economic growth that remains latent in its rural and poor communities.

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